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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a summary of Murray Brown's family systems theory as it applies to the workplace, lists some indicators of when a system is working well, and cites some other guidelines for gauging and improving one's own functioning in the work system. Major concepts of Bowen's theory include: (1) the family and the workplace are systems; (2) systems transmit rules for behavior; (3) behaviors different from one's family of origin can be learned; (4) when the system has high anxiety, people can revert to inappropriate behaviors learned in the family; and (5) self-definition, avoidance of triangling, reducing anxiety in the system, and connecting with care can improve a dysfunctioning system. David Bork, a business consultant, reports that the signs of a healthy system include clearly articulated goals, decisions made at the lowest possible level, undistorted communications, a win-win approach to problem solving, conceptual level rather than personal level conflict, and learning from experience. Patricia Meyer states that how well a person defines himself/herself in an organization depends on the clarity about objectives of the work, the degree to which the person meets job expectations, and the degree to which the person maintains relationship throughout the work system. Kay Kent, a social worker, advises workers to learn as much as possible about the organization, clarify one's job description, and make sure supervision is ongoing. Applying the theory to the workplace can be helpful to women trying to maintain their sense of self and still function in the organization. (A brief synopsis of Toman's birth order position characteristics is included.) (ABL)

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FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY IN THE WORKPLACE

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The University of Michigan, March 6, 1986

THE FIRST WORKPLACE I EXPERIENCED AFTER COLLEGE SPOILED ME FOR SOME OF THE WORK SETTINGS TO COME. I NEVER QUITE UNDERSTOOD WHY UNTIL I STUDIED MURRAY BOWEN'S FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY A FEW YEARS AGO AND LEARNED ABOUT THE APPLICATION OF THAT THEORY TO THE WORKPLACE. I REALIZED THEN THAT MANY OF THE CONCEPTS BOWEN DISCOVERED IN A WELL-FUNCTIONING SYSTEM WERE IN PLACE AND IN PRACTICE IN THAT FIRST WORK SETTING:

1. WE WERE CLEAR ABOUT AND SUPPORTED IN OUR PURPOSE. AS EMPLOYEES IN A PUBLIC ASSISTANCE AGENCY WE HAD AN UNAMBIGUOUS MANDATE TO SERVE THE POOR AND WE HAD BEHIND US A COMMUNITY CONSCIOUSNESS STILL MINDFUL OF THE DEPRESSION-ORIGINS OF THE ENNABLING LEGISLATION.
2. COMMUNICATION WAS CLEAR UP AND DOWN AND SIDEWISE. WE SEEMED AMAZINGLY FREE OF PARANOIA. IF TENSION AROSE, GOSSIP SEEMED MISCHIEVOUS RATHER THAN MALICIOUS. I DON'T REMEMBER CLIQUES. WE SEEMED TO BE ABLE TO HANDLE THE ISSUES IN A RELATIONSHIP WITHOUT PULLING IN ALLIES.
3. THE LEADERSHIP, PIONEERING FOR THE '40'S, WAS SHARED BY TWO WOMEN PROFESSIONALS, EMPLOYED HALF-TIME, BALANCING FAMILY, WORK AND WEEKLY TRAIN RUNS TO NEW YORK TO DO GRADUATE STUDY. THEY MODELLED INDIVIDUATION AND PROMOTED IT IN OTHERS. ONE JEWISH, THE OTHER IRISH CATHOLIC, THEY ALSO REPRESENTED DIVERSITY AND ENJOYED A WORK RELATIONSHIP OF GREAT COMPLIMENTARITY. THE MINORITY PROFESSIONALS THEN BREAKING THROUGH WORK BARRIERS IN NEW HAVEN WERE IRISH, JEWS, AND ITALIANS AND ALL WERE WELL REPRESENTED ON STAFF.
4. CLERICAL AND PROFESSIONAL STAFF ATTENDED STAFF MEETINGS, AND EVERYONE TOOK TURNS ANSWERING PHONES. THE MEETINGS WERE A COMFORTABLE MIX OF CONVIVIALITY AND ACCOMPLISHMENT.

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5. THE SUPERVISORY RELATIONSHIP WAS A JOURNEY TOWARD AUTONOMY AND RESPONSIBILITY. MY HUMOROUS, DIGNIFIED, PATIENT YANKEE SUPERVISOR REMINDED ME THAT PRIVILEGE ENTAILED RESPONSIBILITY.
6. WE SEEMED A LEARNING, DOING, CARING COMMUNITY WHERE ONE COULD MAKE MISTAKES AND STILL SUCCEED.

LATER WHEN I INCORPORATED BOWEN'S THEORY IN COUNSELING WOMEN, I BELIEVE THE THEORY HELPED THE WOMEN TO UNDERSTAND THEIR WORK SYSTEMS BETTER AND TO IMPROVE THEIR FUNCTIONING IN THEIR WORK SYSTEMS.

I'D LIKE IN THE BRIEF TIME WE HAVE TONIGHT:

1. TO SUMMARIZE THE MAJOR CONCEPTS OF BOWEN'S THEORY, IN PARTICULAR AS THE THEORY IS APPLIED AT THE WORKPLACE;
2. TO LIST SOME OF THE INDICATORS OF WHEN A SYSTEM IS WORKING WELL;
3. TO CITE SOME OF THE GUIDELINES FOR GAUGING AND IMPROVING ONE'S OWN FUNCTIONING IN THE WORK SYSTEM.

NONE OF THIS IS INTENDED AS A MAGIC FORMULA FOR CHANGING SYSTEMS OVERNIGHT OR FOR ASSURING ONE SUCCESS IN THE WORK SYSTEM. IT IS INTENDED TO HELP YOU TO OBSERVE THE WAY THE WORK SYSTEM FUNCTIONS AND TO OBSERVE THE WAY YOU ARE FUNCTIONING IN THE SYSTEM. THE VERY ACT OF OBSERVATION CAN, AS BOWEN STATED, HELP CLEAR THE AIR OF EMOTIONALITY THAT CAN OFTEN OBSCURE OUR INDIVIDUAL OPTIONS IN SYSTEMS.

STILL A BIG ORDER BUT LET ME START:

A LITTLE BACKGROUND FIRST. MURRAY BOWEN, THE PSYCHIATRIST WHOSE FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY I AM DRAWING FROM, CONDUCTED EXTENSIVE CLINICAL RESEARCH ON SCHIZOPHRENIC INDIVIDUALS BEFORE HE BEGAN HIS RESEARCH AT THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH IN THE 1950'S. THE UNIQUENESS OF THE NIMH EXPERIENCE IS THAT BOWEN COULD

OBSERVE THE SCHIZOPHRENIC PATIENTS ALONE AND WHEN THEY WERE IN THE MIDDLE OF THEIR FAMILIES. THE FAMILIES IN THE NIMH STUDY ALSO LIVED IN THE HOSPITALS. WHAT BOWEN OBSERVED WAS THAT THE SAME PATIENT, WHO ALONE EVIDENCED SYMPTOM-FREE BEHAVIOR, IN THE MUTUALLY INFLUENCING BEHAVIOR OF THE FAMILY COULD OFTEN BECOME SEVERELY DISTURBED. BOWEN NOTED SIMILAR PATTERNS AT WORK IN FAMILIES WITH LESS INTENSE PROBLEMS. (IT HAD JUST BEEN EASIER TO NOTICE THE PATTERNS WHEN THE PROBLEMS WERE MORE INTENSE.)

THE SHIFT FROM THE INDIVIDUAL TO THE FAMILY AS THE UNIT OF STUDY MEANT SEEING THE FAMILY AS A SYSTEM. NOW INSTEAD OF THE INDIVIDUAL AS THE CENTER OF FOCUS, THE NETWORK OF RELATIONSHIPS IN WHICH AN INDIVIDUAL IS IMBEDDED BECAME THE FOCUS. CLOSER EXAMINATION REVEALED AN EMOTIONAL FIELD WHERE POWERFUL FORCES SEEK TO MAINTAIN BALANCE IN THE SYSTEM. WHEN IMBALANCES OCCUR, EFFORTS MADE TO RETURN BALANCE TO THE SYSTEM CAN PROVOKE CONFLICT OR DYSFUNCTION WHICH CAN APPEAR TO BE ISOLATED SYMPTOMS OF AN INDIVIDUAL. THE EXISTENCE OF THE SYMPTOM INDICATES ANXIETY DRIVEN BY THE IMBALANCE IN THE SYSTEM. IN MANY WAYS THIS IS A COMPLICATED FIELD OF FOCUS BUT IS THERE ANYONE WHO HAS NOT AT SOME TIME SAID IN HER WORKING CAREER: I AM O.K.; IT'S THE SYSTEM THAT IS CRAZY! IN NONE OF THIS IS THE INDIVIDUAL ONLY AT THE MERCY OF THE EMOTIONAL PULLS; BOWEN OBSERVED THAT THE STRUGGLE TO SELF-RESPONSIBILITY IS THE SUREST WAY TO FUNCTION WELL IN ANY SYSTEM.

BOWEN'S THEORY BECAME CONSIDERABLY MORE COMPLEX IN THE THREE DECADES AFTER THE NIMH STUDY. RECENTLY RESEARCHERS AND PRACTITIONERS IN THE FIELD OF ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR BEGAN TO SEE VALUE IN APPLYING BOWEN'S FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY TO THE WORKPLACE. THE FIRST CONFERENCE TO EXPLORE THIS NEW APPLICATION WAS HELD AT GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY IN 1978 WITH FACULTY PRESENTATIONS ON THEORY AND THERAPY. BY THE SECOND CONFERENCE IN 1981, CONSULTANTS, MANAGERS, AND EMPLOYEES WERE ABLE TO REPORT ON ACTUAL APPLICATIONS OF THE THEORY IN THE

WORKPLACE. THE WORK CONTINUES. ONE BOOK, UNDERSTANDING ORGANIZATIONS: APPLICATIONS OF FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY EDITED BY SAGAR AND WISEMAN (YOU WILL FIND THE REFERENCE IN THE BIBLIOGRAPHY) INCLUDED PRESENTATIONS FROM THAT 1982 CONFERENCE. THE APPROACH IS EXAMINED IN CLASSES AT THE WHARTON SCHOOL OF THE UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA AND A GROWING NUMBER OF COUNSELORS AND SOCIAL WORKERS ARE USING THE CONCEPTS IN COACHING EMPLOYEES TRYING TO FUNCTION IN WORK SITUATIONS.

WHAT ARE THE MAJOR CONCEPTS OF BOWEN'S THEORY?

1. HIS SYSTEMS APPROACH PLACES THE INDIVIDUALS AND THE INDIVIDUAL RELATIONSHIPS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE WHOLE SYSTEM AND FOCUSES ON THE EMOTIONAL FIELD OF THAT SYSTEM AND THE EMOTIONAL PULLS AT WORK IN THE SYSTEM.
2. THE WAY THE RELATIONSHIP SYSTEM WORKS IS BASED ON AN EMOTIONAL NOT RATIONAL PROCESS. THE EMOTIONAL PROCESS OPERATES WITHOUT AWARENESS. WHEN ANXIETY IS HIGH, IT CONTRIBUTES TO SOCIAL PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL DYSFUNCTION. IT INCLUDES BLAMING, ACCUSING, GETTING PARANOID, FOCUSING ON RIGHTS AND NEEDS RATHER THAN RESPONSIBILITIES, AND OFTEN EXTRUDES PEOPLE FROM THE SYSTEM.
3. TWO KEY FACTORS INTERACT AND INFLUENCE BEHAVIOR IN THE RELATIONSHIP SYSTEM: ANXIETY AND THE LEVEL OF DIFFERENTIATION: ANXIETY IS THE RESPONSE OF THE ORGANISM TO STRESS, NOT THE STRESS ITSELF. IT IS THE ANXIETY REACTION TO STRESS THAT CREATES THE PROBLEMS AND THE SYMPTOMS. ANXIETY IS ALSO INFECTIOUS AND CAN EASILY SPREAD THROUGH THE SYSTEM.

DIFFERENTIATION OF SELF: BOWEN HERE IS SPEAKING OF THE INDIVIDUATION PROCESS. HE OBSERVED IT CAN ONLY HAPPEN WHEN THE INDIVIDUAL HAS THE ABILITY TO THINK, PROBLEM-SOLVE, SEPARATE THE ISSUE FROM EMOTIONALITY AND DEAL WITH IT ON A CONCEPTUAL LEVEL. RESPONDING AT THE CONCEPTUAL LEVEL MAKES

REFERENCE TO POLICY AND PROCESS. HE SAW A SYSTEM WHERE MAKING MISTAKES WAS POSSIBLE AND PEOPLE LEARNED FROM MISTAKES WHICH THEY SOUGHT TO UNDERSTAND RATHER THAN BE THE OCCASION OF BLAMING. HE ALSO OBSERVED ONE REALLY CAN'T INDIVIDUATE IN A SYSTEM UNLESS ONE CAN FEEL FREE TO LEAVE. OPTIMAL FUNCTIONING IN ANY SYSTEM IS LIKE OPTIMAL FUNCTIONING IN THE FAMILY. THE REAL GOAL IS TO INCREASE THE RESPONSIBLE FUNCTIONING OF SELF AT NO SACRIFICE TO ANYONE.

SYSTEMS CAN BE LOOKED AT ALSO IN TERMS OF DIFFERENTIATION. SOME WILL PERMIT PEOPLE TO BE THEMSELVES, OTHERS WILL PUT PRESSURE ON PEOPLE TO CONFORM TO THE SYSTEM'S VIEW OF HOW THEY SHOULD BE. BETTER DIFFERENTIATED SYSTEMS WILL NOT FALL APART WHEN ONE OR MORE EMPLOYEES BECOME DYSFUNCTIONAL DURING A PERIOD OF ORGANIZATIONAL STRESS. IN LOWER LEVEL SYSTEMS, STAFF ARE MORE LIKELY TO BE UNDIFFERENTIATED AND MORE LIKELY TO BE EMOTIONALLY REACTIVE. THE WORST SCENE FOR A PERSON TRYING TO BE HERSELF IS IN A SYSTEM WHERE THE MAJOR PUSH IS TO BE ONE HAPPY FAMILY AND NO ONE CAN DISAGREE.

4. INCREASED ANXIETY CAN LEAD TO TRIANGLING IN A SYSTEM. OF COURSE WE LEARNED IT FIRST AT HOME. PARENTS MAY FOCUS THEIR ATTENTION ON THE CHILDREN RATHER THAN DEAL WITH THE PROBLEMS OF THEIR OWN RELATIONSHIPS. THE CHILDREN MAY EVEN OUTDO THE PARENTS IN PULLING IN ONE SIBLING TO FORM A TWOSOME AGAINST A THIRD SIBLING. THEY CAN PULL IN ONE PARENT AGAINST ANOTHER TOO. TRIANGLING HAPPENS IN THE WORKPLACE TOO. THE COMMUNICATION OF TRIANGLING IS GOSSIP AND THE GAIN IS SOME RELIEF FROM THE ANXIETY CREATED IN A TROUBLESOME RELATIONSHIP. BUT THE PROBLEM, AS YOU KNOW, IS THAT THE ISSUE BETWEEN THE TWO IN THE TROUBLESOME RELATIONSHIP DOESN'T GET ATTENDED TO AND THE PULLED-IN MEMBER OF THE TRIANGLE RIGHTFULLY REALIZES SOME DISCOMFORT IN HER INVOLUNTARY ROLE.

5. ATTENTION IS ALSO TO BE PAID TO THE MULTIGENERATIONAL PATTERNS AND PROCESSES OF THE SYSTEM--THE EMOTIONAL BAGGAGE HUSBANDS AND WIVES TAKE TO MARRIAGE AND BOSSES AND EMPLOYEES TAKE TO JOBS FROM THEIR FAMILIES OF ORIGIN AND THE INFLUENCE OF THE ORGANIZATIONAL HISTORY AND THE IMPORTANT PEOPLE IN IT ON THE PRESENT SYSTEM.

WE LEARN OUR FIRST SOCIAL BEHAVIOR IN THE CONTEXT OF THE FAMILY. THE WAY WE RELATE TO OR DON'T RELATE TO OUR FAMILIES OF ORIGIN HAS AN UNCANNY WAY OF REVEALING ITSELF IN OTHER SOCIAL SETTINGS LIKE THE WORKPLACE. (THE BEST WAY OF INDIVIDUATING FROM PARENTS IS WITH CONNECTION AND LOVE. SOME DO IT BY DISTANCING, CUTOFF OR BY TOTAL REJECTION.) INDIVIDUAL WORKERS CAN ACT IN THIS WAY AND SUBSYSTEMS CAN FUNCTION IN SIMILAR FASHION ISOLATING THEMSELVES FROM THE LEADERSHIP AND OTHER PARTS OF THE SYSTEM.

BOWEN ALSO INCORPORATED WALTER TOMAN'S IDEAS ABOUT THE WAY SIBLING POSITION IN FAMILY CAN INFLUENCE THE WAY ONE FUNCTIONS AT WORK. A MOST WORKABLE RELATIONSHIP IS A SUPERVISOR WHO WAS OLDEST IN THE FAMILY SUPERVISING AN EMPLOYEE WHO WAS YOUNGEST. INVOLVED HERE ARE QUESTIONS OF LEADERSHIP AND INITIATIVE AND THE WAY THE PERSON RELATES TO CO-WORKERS AND SUPERVISORS, MALE/FEMALE, OLDER/YOUNGER.

(REFER TO HANDOUT.)

WE DO ALSO LEARN BEHAVIORS DIFFERENT FROM THOSE OF OUR FAMILIES. THE PROBLEM IS THAT WE REVERT TO THE OLDER OFTEN INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR LEARNED AS A CHILD UNLESS WE LEARN TO AVOID THE SITUATIONS THAT TRIGGER THE BEHAVIOR.

6. SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONING:

OUR WORKPLACES TYPICALLY HAVE ORGANIZATIONAL CHARTS AND JOB DESCRIPTIONS. THE ORGANIZATIONAL CHART CAN BE CONGRUENT WITH THE WAY PEOPLE ARE FUNCTIONING IN AN ORGANIZATION BUT THE MORE STRESSED A SYSTEM IS THE MORE LIKELY PEOPLE AREN'T DOING WHAT THEIR JOB DESCRIPTIONS SAY. AS IN A FAMILY PEOPLE IN ORGANIZATIONS FILL CERTAIN FUNCTIONAL ROLES WHICH MAINTAIN THE EQUILIBRIUM OF THE SYSTEM. THE MOTHER DIES AND THE OLDEST CHILD TAKES ON SOME OF THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE DECEASED MOTHER.

ONE OLDEST DAUGHTER IN THE FAMILY FOUND HERSELF IN TIMES OF WORKPLACE STRESS TAKING LESS CARE OF HERSELF AND OVERFUNCTIONING IN HER ASSUMPTION OF THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF OTHERS. THE RESULTS FOR HER WERE BURNOUT, FREQUENT CONFLICT, AND EVENTUAL RESENTMENT.

IN SUMMARY:

1. BOWEN NOTED THAT THE FAMILY IS A SYSTEM AND THE WORKPLACE IS A SYSTEM.
2. SYSTEMS TRANSMIT MESSAGES OR RULES FOR BEHAVIOR.
3. WE CAN AND DO LEARN BEHAVIORS DIFFERENT FROM AND SOMETIMES MORE APPROPRIATE THAN THOSE WE LEARNED IN OUR FAMILIES OF ORIGIN.
4. BUT
WHEN THE SYSTEM HAS HIGH ANXIETY WE CAN REVERT TO INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIORS LEARNED IN OUR FAMILIES THAT CAN ESCALATE THE ANXIETY, DISTANCE THE MEMBERS, AND RENDER THE PERSON AND SYSTEM CONFLICTED OR DYSFUNCTIONAL.
5. FORTUNATELY, SELF-DEFINITION, AVOIDANCE OF TRIANGLING, REDUCING ANXIETY IN THE SYSTEM, AND CONNECTING WITH CARE CAN TURN A DYSFUNCTIONING SYSTEM AROUND.

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF A HEALTHY SYSTEM?

DAVID BORK, A BUSINESS CONSULTANT WHO REPORTED AT THE 1982 GEORGETOWN CONFERENCE ANSWERED:

1. GOALS -- IN A HEALTHY ORGANIZATION, THE GOALS ARE CLEARLY ARTICULATED. THEY ARE WRITTEN AND MEASURABLE WITH TIMETABLES OR DATES FOR ACHIEVEMENT OF THE GOALS.
2. DECISION MAKING IN A HEALTHY ORGANIZATION -- DECISIONS ARE MADE AT OR NEAR THE LOWEST POSSIBLE LEVEL WITHIN THE ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE. THE PEOPLE THAT HAVE THE PROBLEMS GENERALLY HAVE THE SOLUTIONS.
3. COMMUNICATIONS IN A HEALTHY ORGANIZATION -- COMMUNICATIONS HORIZONTALLY AND VERTICALLY ARE RELATIVELY UNDISTORTED.
4. WIN-WIN APPROACH TO PROBLEM SOLVING -- THERE IS A MINIMUM AMOUNT OF INAPPROPRIATE WIN-LOSE ACTIVITY AND A MAXIMUM AMOUNT OF WIN-WIN ACTIVITY.
5. CONFLICT -- CONFLICT IS NORMAL AND HEALTHY. IN A VIABLE BUSINESS, INDIVIDUALS SHOULD BE ABLE TO STAND TOE-TO-TOE AND DEBATE MATTERS. THEIR DIFFERENCES ARE AT THE CONCEPTUAL LEVEL, NOT THE PERSONAL LEVEL SINCE THE INTERPERSONAL DIFFERENCES ARE RELATIVELY WELL-RESOLVED.
6. LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE -- IN A HEALTHY BUSINESS, INDIVIDUALS ARE PERMITTED TO LEARN FROM THEIR MISTAKES. THEY ARE ACTIVE PROBLEM SOLVERS. WHEN SOMETHING GOES WRONG, THEY SEARCH FOR THE REASON FOR WHAT HAS OCCURRED RATHER THAN BLAMING THE PERSON RESPONSIBLE FOR THE MISTAKE.

MORE IMPORTANT, FOR OUR PURPOSES, HOW CAN ONE DETERMINE HOW WELL ONE IS DEFINING ONESELF IN AN ORGANIZATION? AT THE 1982 GEORGETOWN CONFERENCE, PATRICIA MEYER SAID IT WILL DEPEND UPON:

1. THE DEGREE OF CLARITY THE PERSON HAS ABOUT THE PRINCIPLES AND OBJECTIVES OF HER WORK;
2. THE DEGREE TO WHICH THE PERSON MEETS JOB EXPECTATIONS AND
3. THE DEGREE TO WHICH THE PERSON MAINTAINS RELATIONSHIPS THROUGHOUT THE WORK SYSTEM.

SHE SAW SELF-DEFINITION AS THREE-DIMENSIONAL:

- A) DEFINING SELF WITHIN WHICH CONSISTS OF BUILDING LIFELONG GOALS FOR ONE'S CAREER AND SETTING PARAMETERS OF TOLERANCE SO THAT ONE CAN EMOTIONALLY WALK OUT IF THE PRESSURES OF THE SYSTEM EXCEED THOSE PARAMETERS.
- B) DEFINING SELF TO THE WORKPLACE: WHICH REQUIRES SUBSTANTIAL KNOWLEDGE OF THE WORK SYSTEM, OF HOW ONE REACTS UNDER STRESS, AND HOW COLLEAGUES AND BOSSES ACT UNDER STRESS. ESTABLISHING RELATIONSHIPS WITH COLLEAGUES, WHICH CAN CONFINE CONFLICT TO TIMES WHEN ONE HAS TO TAKE A STAND IN CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES. SHE THOUGHT IT IS IMPORTANT NOT TO RESPOND TO ANXIETY IN THE SYSTEM UNLESS IT AFFECTS THE FUNCTIONING OF SELF.
HER REASONING: SINCE GOSSIP IS A GOOD BAROMETER OF EMOTIONAL REACTIVITY IN THE WORK SYSTEM, A PERSON MAY PARTICIPATE IN THE GOSSIP PROCESS OR DEFINE HERSELF OUTSIDE THAT PROCESS.
- C) DEFINING SELF TO MANAGEMENT: REPORTING PLANS, PROJECTS AND TASKS TO ONE'S MANAGER HELPS DEFINE A DIRECTION FOR SELF TO THE SYSTEM RATHER THAN LETTING THE SYSTEM DEFINE THE DIRECTION TO SELF.

KAY KENT, WITH WHOM I STUDIED THE BOWEN THEORY AT THE MENNINGER FOUNDATION AND NOW A SOCIAL WORKER IN PRIVATE PRACTICE IN TOPEKA, HAD ADDITIONAL ADVICE: SHE CAUTIONS:

1. OBSERVE TO LEARN AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE ABOUT YOUR JOB AND YOUR ORGANIZATION. OBSERVING, SHE REMINDED, WILL HELP US TO DEINTENSIFY THEREBY CUTTING DOWN THE ANXIETY IN THE SYSTEM, A PARALLEL IMPERATIVE.

LEARN THE HISTORY OF THE ORGANIZATION AND THE HISTORY OF YOUR JOB.

NOTE THE PATTERNS OF INTERACTION, THE DISTANCING, THE CONFLICT, THE TRIANGLES, THE OVERFUNCTIONING AND UNDERFUNCTIONING.

LOOK AT THE EMOTIONALLY CHARGED ISSUES IN THE ORGANIZATION. (WAS WORK REDUCTION, ELIMINATION OF THE UNIT EVER AN ISSUE?)

WHAT ARE THE PRIMARY SOURCES OF ORGANIZATIONAL STRESS NOW?

2. CREATE A PLAN FOR MAINTAINING CONTACT IN THE AGENCY (MUCH LIKE MEYER). LOT OF DISTANCE, ANGER CAN BE TAKEN CARE OF BY KNOWING EACH OTHER.
3. CLARIFY YOUR POSITION: UPDATE YOUR JOB DESCRIPTION. IF IT IS AMBIGUOUS, SEEK CLARIFICATION AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE. YOU NEED TO BE CLEAR, TO SEEK CLARIFICATION AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE. YOU NEED TO BE CLEAR TO FUNCTION AUTONOMOUSLY.
4. MAKE SURE THAT THE PROCESS OF SUPERVISION IS ONGOING. SUPERVISION SHOULD BEGIN AT THE START OF EMPLOYMENT, EXPECTATIONS SHOULD BE MADE CLEAR AND THERE SHOULD BE DISCUSSIONS OF WORK PLANNED, IN PROCESS OR COMPLETED. SUPERVISION IS THE MEANS FOR LEARNING THE INFORMATION AND SKILLS THAT INCREASINGLY ENABLE THE SUPERVISEE TO BECOME MORE AUTONOMOUS. IF SUPERVISION IS NOT WORKING, IT MEANS THE EMPLOYEE IS NOT LEARNING.

IN MY JUDGMENT APPLYING THE THEORY TO THE WORKPLACE CAN BE HELPFUL TO WOMEN TRYING TO MAINTAIN THEIR SENSE OF SELF AND STILL FUNCTION IN THE ORGANIZATION.

I FIND PARTICULARLY USEFUL THE IMPORTANCE THE THEORY PLACES ON SELF-DEFINITION AND CLEAR THINKING TO AVOID THE SYSTEMIC DANGERS OF ENMESHMENT AND OVER REACTIVITY.

RECENTLY JILL CONSIDINE, FORMER PRESIDENT OF THE FIRST WOMEN'S BANK IN NEW YORK, NEWLY APPOINTED SUPERINTENDENT OF BANKS OF NEW YORK, WAS ASKED HER FORMULA FOR SUCCEEDING IN THE BANKING SYSTEM. "NUMBER ONE, YOU'VE GOT TO KNOW YOURSELF, WHAT YOUR NEEDS ARE AND WHAT YOU WANT. THIS IS GOING TO INCUR RISK BUT YOU CAN REDUCE THE RISK BY KNOWING YOURSELF AND MAKING YOUR OPINIONS KNOWN AND IF THERE IS NOT A FIT WHERE YOU ARE, YOU MUST LOOK SOMEWHERE ELSE IF YOU REALLY WANT TO SUCCEED.

SHE SOUNDED AS THOUGH SHE COULD ALSO HANDLE WORK RELATIONSHIPS. TO HER, POLITICS IN THE SYSTEM WAS SIMPLY THE WAY PEOPLE INTERACT. "I ALWAYS FELT THERE WAS GOOD ON BOTH SIDES BUT I ALWAYS HAD MY INTEGRITY."

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CHARACTERISTICS OF BIRTH ORDER POSITION

Dr. Walter Toman studied healthy families. From his research, he found a number of factors that influenced behavior. Toman's view is that behavior is influenced by rank or birth order, by the sex mix of siblings, and by the same sex parent. Dr. Toman has outlined some behavior patterns from each of the various birth positions. Characteristics of each position follow:

OLDEST - OLDER

- Seeks to understand
- Is prepared to lead
- Cares for, guides, protects
- Expects to control, and be in charge

YOUNGEST - YOUNGER

- Wants to be understood
- Is carefree, and may be careless
- Wants to consult with someone older
- Is competitive with someone older

MIDDLE

- Has difficulty getting recognition
- May feel overlooked or excluded
- May leave or move out of the family

ONLY

- Is looking for a parent
- Has no peers, so learns social interaction from parents
- Is aloof, watches with amazement the activities of peers
- Seeks the attention of a person in authority
- Is not as well prepared for contact with others

Dr. Toman's classic study was FAMILY CONSTELLATION, Springer: New York, 1976, third edition.

This material is from David Bork's presentation "Using Family Systems Theory in Family and Close-Held Businesses," in Sagar, R.R., and Wiseman, K.K., UNDERSTANDING ORGANIZATIONS: APPLICATIONS OF FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY, Georgetown University Family Center, 1982.

Toman suggests that the behavior is not fated but the tendency is there. Awareness of the tendency and new learning can make the behavior more appropriate by broadening the repertoire of behavior to be drawn on.

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